

From A to Zen – Exploring the Wisdom of China – Part 4 of 7

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Guan Yin

Among the many deities and immortalised national heroes one can see in Chinese temples and shrines, Guan Yin (观音) is one of the most intriguing ones for me. Referred to as a Buddha by some, a Bodhisattva by others, and as the Chinese Virgin Mary amongst many other names, it is not even clear whether one should refer to Guan Yin as He or She. In Western folk-art and esoteric shops Guan Yin figurines stand among other famous cultural totems such as Laughing Buddhas, Shivas, Yogis, and Dreamcatchers.

Here in Dalian, she appears all over the city, in shrines, paintings and special shops. She can also be seen off the coast of the small southern beach Jin Sha Tan (金沙滩) in form of a big stone statue watching over the beach. And if you walk along Tang Shan Jie (唐山街) coming from Hope Square (希望广场), you come past the Song Shan Temple, at Tong Shan Jie (通山街). Here, on the outside, just around the corner, there is a big bronze statue of Guan Yin with many arms.

But what is the story behind Guan Yin and what is her significance? Luckily some friendly locals shared their stories and anecdotes allowing the non-Chinese to understand a bit more about Chinese culture.

Sally, a Chinese language teacher

Is Guan Yin a man or a woman?

Guan Yin is in principle a god like a Western god. He is benevolent and friendly towards humans. At some point he wanted to become a human being so that he could experience sickness, hard work and all the bad things like pain and suffering. He believed that through this he could understand people better and consequently be of more help and support. So he transformed into a man of flesh and blood and spent time living the everyday life of a mortal. Years passed and he came to understand the ways of people. But he reached the conclusion that to experience real hardship and suffering he would have to live the life of a woman. After all, women went through the pains of giving birth and, in those times, they were disadvantaged over men in society and consequently suffered more. From then on, in many traditions, Guan Yin has become immortalised as a female deity.

Who is Guan Yin?

Guan Yin has different guises. One of them is Song Zi Guan Yin (送子观音), responsible for giving every family children. After their marriage, couples go

to the temple to pray for children.

When I was about five years old, my grandparents took me to a Song Ze temple. There was a statue of Guan Yin with her arms stretched out and many small children sitting on them next to each other. I didn't know what we had come here for and asked my grandfather why we were here. But he just told me to choose one of the children. I picked a small boy with a cute face. Then my grandfather gave me 10 Yuan and told me to put it into the collection box on the way out. I should think of the boy when I put the money in. Of course I did it.

About one and a half years later I received a little brother. Only then did I understand why we had been at the temple. I used to make fun of my brother, telling him that I bought him for 10 Yuan. He hated it.

Michael, an English language teacher

Who is Guan Yin?

Guan Yin Pusa (观音菩萨), also called the Goddess of Mercy is a Bodhisattva, one of the reincarnations of the Buddha. The idea of Bodhisattva is someone who might intercede in the world on our behalf. You can ask her for advice for certain major decisions in life, such as marriage.

Note:

The idea of a Bodhisattva belongs to the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. Unlike the Theravada school of Buddhism which sees enlightenment as attainable only through individual ways, in the Mahayana tradition a Bodhisattva can help you on the way. Bodhisattvas are beings who have gained enlightenment but chose not to ascend into Nirvana. They remain in the worldly realm of Maya to assist individuals in their quest for enlightenment, appearing in varying incarnations.

Lily, freelancer and China – UK relations expert

Who is Guan Yin?

Guan Yin is one of the gods or goddesses in Asia. She is both man and woman and neither. Nobody can specify his (or her) gender. The reason for this is that there are various traditions telling different stories about where the image of Guan Yin comes from. Originally, the Buddhist philosophy in China comes from India and so does Guan Yin, in this story.

Long time ago there was kingdom in India in which a King ruled who had three daughters. As time passed, the two older sisters found husbands and got married. But the youngest one didn't want to bind herself to a man and marry. Instead, she was interested in Buddhism and was keenly engaged in

learning the philosophy and practice. Her father didn't like this at all, as he thought it was a waste of time. However, all attempts to stop his daughter from practicing Buddhism failed. Angry and frustrated as he had become, he had the temple in which the daughter studied, burned to the ground. Hundreds of monks were killed in the fire.

Because what the King had done was so horrendous, he was punished by the gods. He soon had warts all over his face, disfigurements appeared on his body and he became seriously ill. Fearing for his life, he consulted a sage about how he could be healed. The sage replied that if he sacrificed a hand and an eye from a family member, he would be saved. When he asked for this favour, no one wanted to help him, including his two eldest daughters. The youngest daughter, however, who had studied the Buddhist philosophy volunteered. She sacrificed her hand and her eye and soon the King enjoyed good health again.

That deed moved the Gods deeply and they saw that the youngest daughter had a pure heart and true compassion. They rewarded her with a thousand eyes and a thousand hands. "You have a heart of gold", they said. "With the thousand eyes and the thousand hands you will find the needy in this earthly world and you will be able to save everyone from suffering".

This is where the image comes from of the Qian Shou, Qian Yan (千手千眼) (thousand hands, thousand eyes) Guan Yin. This story probably entered into China during the Tang Dynasty (about AD 618 to 907) when Buddhism flourished in China and many temples were built. At that time Guan Yin could have been a male and a female. She has the ability to change herself into different appearances to be able to come close to the normal human beings and help them. Because people felt more affinity with the image of Guan Yin as a woman, this image became very popular. However, no one defines Guan Yin as either male or female.

Guan Yin has 36 different appearances. Normally you will see her sitting on a Lotus flower, in the Lotus Position (legs crossed over each other). In one hand she holds a bottle with pure water in it and in the other hand she carries a willow twig. It is believed that the Willow drives away diseases easily. This is Yang Zhi (杨枝) (willow) Guan Yin. In this form she is like a doctor.

There is a popular prayer chant for Guan Yin. It is like a mantra and repeats itself.

Nan wu guan shi yin pu sa (南无观世音菩萨)

But, take care, you shouldn't chant after 5:30 in the evening, because that is considered too late. Even the gods need to rest.

If you keep your eyes open you will undoubtedly see Guan Yin around Dalian and around China. And if you ask your Chinese friends it is very likely that you will hear a different story. Amongst many things you might hear that

Guan Yin is a Buddha of compassion, that she is a god protecting sailors and fisher men on the seas, that she is often associated with vegetarianism and is a popular god in vegetarian restaurants.

If you want clean water, the saying goes, then follow the stream to its source. In this sense, if you want to know or see more, the Dalian Song Shan temple is a good destination for you. But before going there, it is a good idea to familiarise yourself with the rules.

The Thousand Hands Thousand Eyes Guan Yin in Dalian

The Temple is over thousand years old. Please pay respect to the rules.

1. Dress formal, tidy and in a non offensive way
2. No smoking, alcohol, meat and no drunken behaviour
3. Don't disturb the monks in their studies
4. Keep your voice low and don't talk during a ceremony
5. For your offering, light three incense sticks, not more or less
6. No littering, keep the place clean
7. Visiting Buddhists, give your offerings to the monks to display; don't display them yourself
8. Donation of books, please give to the monk in charge. Don't just leave them there.
9. To donate money, give it to the monk in charge
10. To young people: this is not a place to take your date
11. No fortune telling and palm reading in the temple
12. No photography inside
13. Opening times: daily from 7am to 4pm, except on public holidays